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Discipline of Literary Criticism

Discipline

In order to fully comprehend the cultural and social significance of television as the dominant entertainment and information vehicle of our time, it is necessary to consider the possible relevance of the discipline of literary criticism.

Although television has altered the relatively simple relationship between author and literary work through its complex industrial process of creation and marketing of audio-visual products, nevertheless, at the levels of theme and style, television programming as a work of human creation is amenable to critical analysis.

The methods and theories of literary criticism can provide us with structures of thought and knowledge as well as a thorough and systematic understanding of the evolution of genres, myths, symbols and modes. This helps us to better comprehend the position of violence, the erosive and destructive tendencies of image production and perhaps even suggest possible orientations towards unexplored regions and neglected possibilities.

The following paper includes a brief discussion of the tragicomic genre and of the ethical and archetypal approaches to literary criticism. These aspects of the discipline have particular relevance to the discussion of violence. The bibliographical citations will serve the interested reader as an introduction to a number of basic texts.

Principles and Techniques of Literary Criticism

Aristotle used the term "poetics" to describe the determination of the fundamental principles of the fictional arts. His treatise was the first disciplined attempt to ascertain the essences of literary expression and to formulate such knowledge according to a theory of the essential, the necessary or necessary and sufficient properties.

To criticize is, etymologically, to judge or to analyze. But the standards by which critics evaluate or describe a literary work vary widely. The two approaches which have the most relevance for the producers of electronic images are the moral and archetypal. The ethical approach is used by those critics who choose to consider literature for its moral applications to humanity, while the archetypal approach is concerned with underlying psychological or social patterns that recur in particular works of literature, regardless of their particular time.

Whatever the critical theory, there is general agreement that literary criticism itself is an essential aspect of culture:

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Problems of Mass Media and the Discipline of Literary Criticism

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"The critic [is] ... the pioneer of education and the shaper of cultural tradition....A public that tries to do without criticism, and asserts that it knows what it wants or likes, brutalizes the arts and loses its cultural memory. Art for art's sake is a retreat from criticism which ends in an impoverishment of civilized life itself. The only way to forestall the work of criticism is through censorship, which has the same relation to criticism that lynching has to justice."

(Frye, ANATOMY OF CRITICISM, p. 4)

There are four basic narrative categories: the romantic, the tragic, the comic and the ironic. The ordinary meanings of these terms are employed to describe particular moods or human attitudes as well as general characteristics of literary fictions, regardless of the literary genre. Northrop Frye describes these categories as mythoi or generic plots. (Definition of mythos: a structural organizing principle of literary form, ANATOMY, p. 341). He defines each mythos in terms of its place within a cyclical structure:

"The top half of the natural cycle is the world of romance and the analogy of innocence; the lower half is the world of 'realism' and the analogy of experience. There are thus four main types of mythical movement: within romance, within experience, down and up. The downward movement is the tragic movement; the wheel of fortune falling from innocence toward hamartia, and from Hamartia to catastrophe. The upward movement is the comic movement, from threatening complications to a happy ending and a general assumption of post-dated innocence in which everyone lives happily ever after."

(Frye, ANATOMY OF CRITICISM, p. 162)

The narrative category that has received the most critical interest has been that of tragedy: what Aristotle termed a dramatic imitation (or representation) of an action of high importance. Perhaps the reason for this concern with the tragic mode is the traditional depiction of the hero as a great man who suffers nobly.

"...the idea of nobility is inseparable from the idea of tragedy, which cannot exist without it. If tragedy is not the imitation or even the modified representation of noble actions it is certainly a representation of actions considered as noble, and herein lies its essential nature, since no man can conceive it unless he is capable of believing in the greatness and

importance of man. Its action is usually... calamitous, because it is only in calamity that the human spirit has the opportunity to reveal itself triumphant over the outward universe which fails to conquer it....

Tragedy is essentially an expression, not of despair, but of the triumph over despair and of confidence in the value of human life.... We accept gladly the outward defeats which it describes for the sake of the inward victories which it reveals.... It is a profession of faith, and a sort of religion; a way of looking at life by virtue of which it is robbed of its pain....
(Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Tragic Fallacy"
from THE MODERN TEMPTER, 1929)

Another aspect, equally important, that reveals the reason for man's fascination with tragedy is the finality of the expression as the heroic action and passion inevitably ends with the death of the hero.

"The basis of the tragic vision is being in time, the sense of the one-directional quality of life, where every thing happens once and for all, where every act brings unavoidable and fateful consequences, and where all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation.

In the tragic vision death is, not an incident in life, not even the inevitable end of life, but the essential event that gives shape and form to life. Death is what defines the individual, and marks him off from the continuity of life that flows indefinitely between the past and the future. It gives to the individual life a parabola shape, rising from birth to maturity, and sinking again, and this parabola movement of rise and fall is also the typical shape of tragedy."

(Northrop Frye, FOOLS OF TIME -- STUDIES
IN SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY, 1967)

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• Ethical Criticism

Literature's moral applications to humanity

Of the various types of criticism practiced today, the moral approach has undoubtedly the longest history. Plato was concerned with the moral effect the poet might have in his ideal Republic; Horace gave great weight to the usefulness as well as the beauty of poetry. Renaissance figures, like Sir Philip Sidney, were humanists believing that man is a being who may be distinguished from the animal by his reason and his possession of ethical standards: their watchwords were order, discipline, restraint. Dr. Johnson did not hesitate to judge the moral content of the writers whom he discussed in *THE LIVES OF THE POETS*. Matthew Arnold argued the importance of the "high seriousness" of art. Each of these holds the conviction that the importance of literature is not merely in its way of saying, but also in what it says.

In the twentieth century, the impulse toward moral evaluation has been expressed chiefly by writers who are grouped under the label, Neo-Humanist. Their chief interest lies in literature as a "criticism" of life. They are concerned with the ends of literature as affecting man, with literature as it takes its place in the human forum of ideas and attitudes.

(From, Wilbur Scott, "Literature and Moral Ideas", *FIVE APPROACHES OF LITERARY CRITICISM*, (1962), pp. 23-6.)

The function of ethical criticism

Ethical criticism functions to advise and guide; its intention is to rank works of literature according to a definable set of standards. In the past the criteria for judging a work of art were derived from traditional religious virtues, whether Christian or classical. In this century, the standard by which art is evaluated is its relation to humanity or the social order. Frye calls this "the consciousness of the presence of society" or "the sense of the real presence of culture in the community".

"Ethical criticism deals with art as a communication: from the past to the present, and is based on the conception of the total and simultaneous possession of past culture....It is designed to express the contemporary impact of all art, without selecting a tradition....Criticism has no business to react against things, but should show a steady advance toward indiscriminating catholicity."

(Frye, *ANATOMY OF CRITICISM*, pp. 24-5.)

T.S. Eliot speaks of the critic's role as one of evaluating Art in terms that speak to the contemporary generation: the artist's place or importance can only be judged in terms of the tradition in which he has created. For him literature is a continuing process: "art never improves, but the material of art is never quite the same."

"No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead....The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted..."

(T.S. Eliot, TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT, 1919)

Irving Babbitt discusses the critic's relation to the creator in terms of a higher standard. What is unique about the creative imagination must be judged with reference to the universal. Originality needs to be considered according to restrictive and selectives principles of value.

"It is not enough...that the critic should ask what the creator aimed to do and whether he has fulfilled his aim; he must also ask whether the aim is intrinsically worthwhile....The critic will begin to have taste only when he refers the creative expression and his impression of it to some standard that is set above both. And if this standard is to be purified of every taint of formalism, it must not be merely traditional or rationalistic, but must rest on an immediate perception of what is normal and human....Creation of the first order...has a restrained and humanized intensity."

(Irving Babbitt, GENIUS AND TASTE)

When Frye discusses ethical criticism, he does so in terms of the value of culture to broad civilizational ends. Works of art have a "sequence of meanings" and contain certain symbols or motifs that can be applied according to various theories of criticism to reveal a number of relations to other creative expressions as well as to different human and social expectations.

"The goal of ethical criticism is trans-valuation, the ability to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture....Most ethical action is a mechanical reflex of habit: to get any principle of freedom in it we need some kind of theory of action, theory in the sense of theoria, a withdrawn or detached vision of the means and end of action which does not paralyze action, but makes it purposeful by enlightening its aims."

(Frye, ANATOMY OF CRITICISM, p. 348.)

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• Archetypal Criticism

The unconscious mind of the human race

One can delineate the archetypal method of literary criticism as a demonstration of some basic cultural pattern of great meaning and appeal to humanity in a work of art. This approach shares certain procedures of other critical approaches: it requires close textual readings, like the formalistic, and yet is concerned humanistically with more than the intrinsic value of aesthetic satisfaction; it seems psychological insofar as it analyzes the work of art's appeal to the audience and yet sociological in its attendance upon basic cultural patterns as central to that appeal; it is historical in its investigation of a cultural or social past, but nonhistorical in its demonstration of literature's timeless value, independent of particular periods.

Archetypal criticism (founded on scholarly research by an anthropologist investigating the history of magic and ritual and by a student of Freud concerned with analytic psychology) asserts the validity of myth and its retention in the social memory. These two forces have had a strong appeal to the creative imagination of such twentieth century writers as D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Robert Graves, James Joyce, Yeats and C.S. Lewis. The goal of this critical approach, also called the totemic, mythological, or ritualistic, is to discover and decode the secret language in literary works so that it may have a more rational meaning. It also aims to discover basic cultural patterns which assume a mythic quality in their permanence within a particular culture.

(From, Wilbur Scott, "Literature in the Light of Myth", FIVE APPROACHES OF LITERARY CRITICISM, pp. 247-51.)

The foundations of archetypal criticism

The studies of myth initiated by the work of Sir James Fraser (THE GOLDEN BOUGH) and Carl Jung have had a direct influence upon the creative use of myth in modern literature. The practitioners of the archetypal approach to criticism seek to describe the mythical patterns that dramatize the universal elements in human nature. Carl Jung speaks of artistic creation in terms archetypal symbols "drawn from the realm of human consciousness". The poet assimilates this material and expresses it in such a manner that the reader is made conscious of the presence of the past.

"It is ... to be expected of the poet that he will resort to mythology in order to give his experience its most fitting expression. It would be a serious mistake to suppose that he works with materials received at second-hand. The primordial experience is the source of his creativeness; it cannot be fathomed, and therefore requires mythological imagery to give it form. In itself it offers

no words or images, for it is a vision seen
'as in a glass, darkly'."

"The secret of artistic creation and of the effectiveness of art is to be found in a return to the state of participation mystique -- to that level of experience at which it is man who lives, and not the individual, and at which the weal or woe of the single human being does not count, but only human existence. This is why every great work of art is objective and impersonal."

(C.G. Jung, "Psychology and Literature",
MODERN MAN IN SEARCH OF A SOUL, 1933,
pp. 164, 172)

Northrop Frye links the "formulas" or myths of primitive cultures to the recurrence of these patterns in great works of literature. For him the myth serves as a structural device for classifying various fictional modes.

"Total literary history gives us a glimpse of the possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture....The relation of later literature to these primitive formulas is by no means purely one of complication...in fact there seems to be a general tendency on the part of great classics to revert to the....The profound masterpiece draws us to a point at which we seem to see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance."

(Frye, ANATOMY OF CRITICISM, p. 17)

One limitation of the archetypal approach is its too literal application. One must avoid an allegorical interpretation of a creative work that strives to determine by ingenious means exact parallels between ritual patterns in primitive cultures and the nuances of a contemporary novel or poem.

"As in studying all good poetry, we must resist the impulse to line up, on a secondary level of meaning, exact equivalents for the narrative elements, for such a procedure stems from the rude assumption that every part of the story is a precision-tooled cog in an allegorical machine. But we must be sensitive to parallels, analogies, intimations; thus, while preserving the fullness and flexibility of the work, we can investigate its extraordinarily moving tonal richness. And in accounting for tone we necessarily move toward a definition of structure."

(Robert Heilman, "The Turn of the Screw as Poem"
from The University of Kansas City Review, XIV, no.4)

